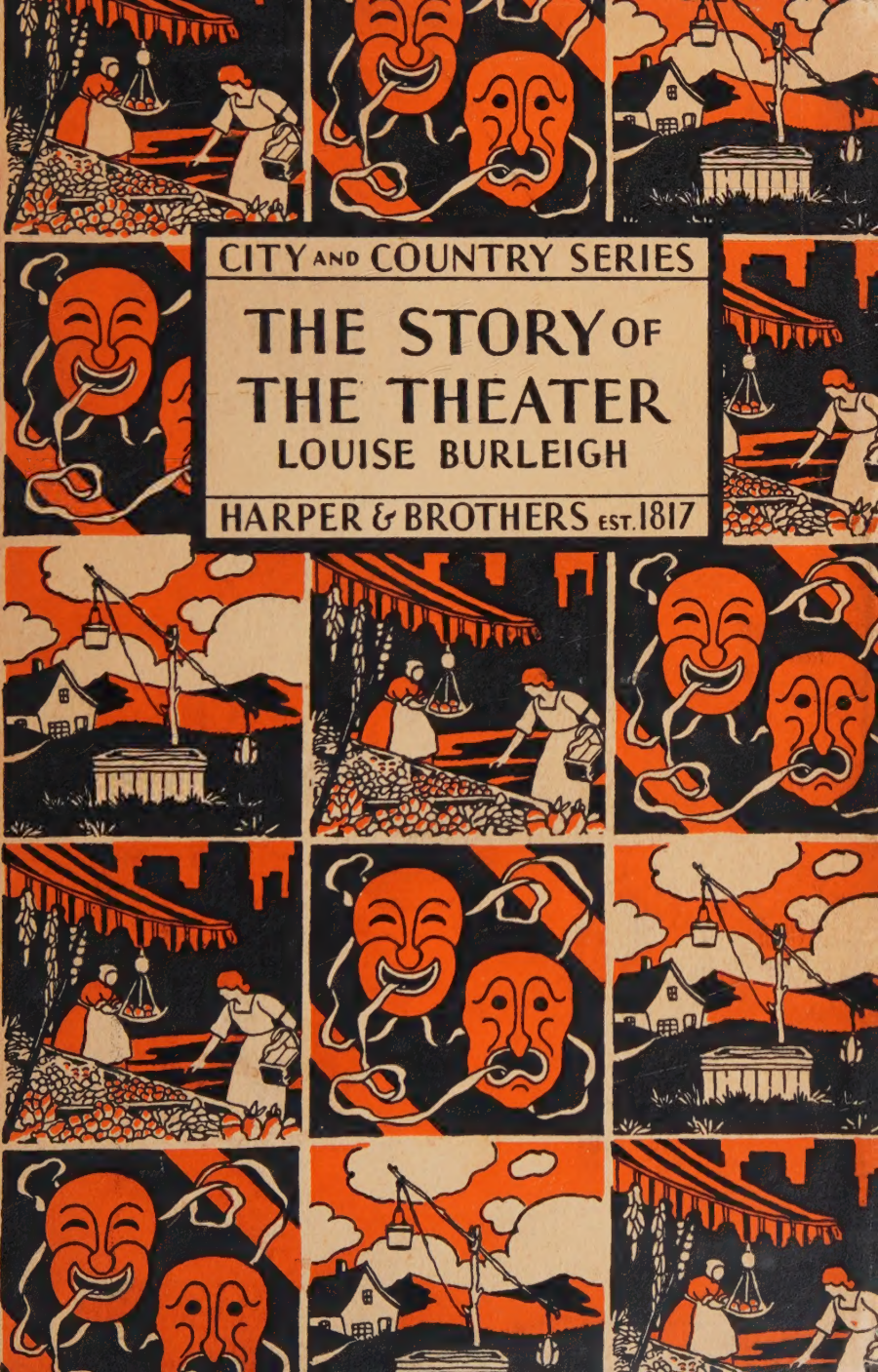

CITY AND COUNTRY SERIES

THE STORY OF THE THEATER

LOUISE BURLEIGH

HARPER & BROTHERS EST. 1817

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THE STORY OF THE THEATER

by

LOUISE BURLEIGH

Illustrated by BEN KUTCHER *with about thirty line drawings in black and white and a frontispiece and end paper in color.*

A FASCINATING story, the tracing of the theater from the earliest days in Greece and Rome, on through the days of wandering players in England and on the continent, of the mystery and miracle plays, up to the modern theater of today.

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THE STORY OF THE THEATER

IT IS LIKE MAGIC. IT *IS* MAGIC

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BY
LOUISE BURLEIGH

WITH PICTURES BY BEN KUTCHER

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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TO BOO,
BECAUSE SHE LOVES DRESSING-UP

THE STORY OF THE THEATER

THE STORY OF THE THEATER

WHEN we go to the theater we sit in comfortable chairs in a room which is warmed in winter and cooled in summer. The auditorium grows dark. The curtain opens. We forget everything but what is happening on the stage. A story takes place before us. We see and hear it all. The people come and go like real people. We forget that we are seeing a play. As long as the lights are shining brightly on the stage, we seem to be part of the story as it happens. Only when the curtain closes and we see the audience, all watching with us, do we blink our eyes and remember that it is all pretending.

But the theater has not always been as we see it. Some people can remember a time when there were only gas lamps to light the stage. Before gas was used, theaters were lighted by lamps or candles. Today we

should find a stage so lighted very strange. And the stiff, flat trees, painted on cloth, would look curious to us, too. But our grandparents and great-grandparents enjoyed their theater quite as much as we do ours. To them the stories pretended on the candle-lit stage seemed real and beautiful.

Even longer ago, before America had any English settlers, our ever-so-many-great-grandparents used to go to a theater which would seem to us stranger yet. It had a roof over only a small part of it. It had torches to give light. But in those days, too, those ever-so-many-great-grandparents of ours thought they had a very wonderful theater. And so they did! For that was the time when Will Shakespeare wrote and acted in the theater in England.

Before the time of Will Shakespeare's theater, there were no theater buildings in England. There were plays. There were actors who showed these plays for the people. Poor and ragged, companies of actors wandered

from town to town. When they came to a village they built a wooden stage in the courtyard of an inn. There they acted their plays, while the villagers stood about the courtyard and watched.

And earlier than that time? There were plays even before the traveling actors began to wander about England. Each village had its own plays then. Little stages called *pageants* were built. They were carts on wheels. They had covers or canopies. When the actors were ready, the curtains were lifted and the story was shown. The people who came to see and hear stood in the muddy street. They were glad of a chance to see any play, for plays were acted only once a year. And before the time of the pageant plays there were no plays at all, except the plays which were given in the Church.

At first it seems surprising that the story of our English theater should begin in the Church. But if we were to trace back the history of other theaters, we should find that

they all began in a religious ceremony. The French theater had a beginning in the Church, just as the English theater did. The Greek theater began in the worship of the Greek gods. The Japanese theater was a charm to please the Earthquake god so that he would not shake the earth and destroy towns and people. Even among savage people, who have no real theater like ours, we find processions and dances and songs, which are the seed of a theater. All theaters have their beginning in the Church.

So our theater is, in a way, the grandchild of the Church. But it had other grandparents —four in all—just as each of us had four grandparents. These other grandparents are the folk songs and dances of the English people, the rebirth of learning, and the great theater of Greece. Each one of them gave something important to our theater. If we are to understand how our theater came to be what it is, we shall have to get acquainted with its grandparents.

THE CHURCH TAUGHT THE PEOPLE WITH MYSTERY PLAYS

THE CHURCH AND MYSTERY PLAYS

A thousand years ago there was only one Church in England. There were a great many church buildings, but they were all part of the organization of the Church of Rome. All the services of the Church were in Latin. Very few people in England understood Latin. When they went to church, they did not know what was being said. And the Church had a great deal to teach people. There were no printed books. Most people could not read. The Bible was kept in the churches, but the Bible, too, was in Latin or Greek. Its wonderful stories were many of them unknown to the people. So it came about that little plays were made by the priests of the Church, to act out the Bible stories for the people to see.

The first Bible play of which we know was an Easter play. It was acted as part of the festival service on Easter Sunday. It was spoken and sung in Latin. But when

it was acted out, even people who did not understand the words could see just how it all happened. In the church a tomb was built where all the people could see it, near the altar. Two priests were dressed in long robes and great wings: they were to represent two angels. Two more priests wore the dresses of women: they were to be Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalen. The two women came to the tomb, weeping. There they found the two angels. The angels asked them:

"What are you seeking in the tomb, O Christian women?"

The sorrowing women answered: "Jesus of Nazareth, who has been crucified, Heavenly Messengers!"

Then the angels chanted, with rejoicing and triumph: "He is not here! He has arisen, as He said He would arise! Go forth, and tell to all the world that He is risen from the grave!"

Everyone could see the sadness of the women

as they looked for their lost Saviour. Everyone could hear the joy in the voices of the angels. Everyone could see the women filled with gladness, as they went forth to bear the tidings. There was no one who could not understand the Easter story.

At Christmas, too, the priests made a play about the birth of the Holy Child. The manger was built near the pulpit. It was hidden from the people by a curtain. A star was fastened above it. Then the priests came in, dressed in skins and rough cloths. One carried a lamb. The others had crooks. All the people knew at once that here were the shepherds, for everyone had seen shepherds watching their flocks on the English hillsides. These shepherds looked for the Star in the East. When they found it, over the manger, they fell upon their knees. A priest dressed like an angel drew back the curtain. There was the Christ Child lying in his mother's arms. Sometimes oxen and sheep were looking down at Him. And the shepherds came

forward timidly and offered Him gifts, while the choir sang a Christmas hymn.

Year after year the Church taught the people with these little plays. They were called Mystery plays. New stories were added. The story of Abraham and Isaac was made into a play. The story of Noah and the Ark was made into a play. The story of Herod and the young children was made into a play. And a great many other stories from the Old and New Testaments were acted for the people to see.

We do not know just when the first Church play was sung or spoken in English. Travel was very hard in those times. People did not move about from one place to another, and ideas as well as people had to get about very slowly. It may be that some traveler brought back news from France or from Italy of plays which were spoken in a language which the people could understand. Or it may have been that some thoughtful priest who had always been at home in his own parish began

to wonder why he should not tell his people these stories in their own lovely English. All that we can know certainly is that at last—after two hundred years—plays were made to be spoken in English in the churches.

So many people crowded to hear these English plays that the churches could not hold them! The priests had to move their plays outdoors, where there was more room. Sometimes they were acted on the porches, and sometimes they were acted in the churchyards. The tomb for the Easter story and the manger for the Christmas story were carried outside as well. An Ark was built for Noah and the Flood. And for other plays, there were sometimes a little row of doors, so that the people could come and go in the story. In this way the plays grew every year.

As long as the plays had been shown inside the church, they had seemed very far away and solemn. They had been part of the great serious church service, indoors. But when

they were taken outside, they seemed to come nearer to ordinary people and ordinary life. The shepherds sounded like real shepherds. Noah got to be a real person, like a shipbuilder everybody might know. When he tried to take Mrs. Noah into the Ark, she would refuse to go. She would say that she was not ready, giving silly excuses. Often Noah would beat her with a stick, or carry her in, kicking and squealing! This delighted the people. The more the plays grew to be like their everyday life, the better people liked them.

And now, when the plays were no longer acted inside the church, and were spoken in a language familiar to all the people, it was no longer necessary for the busy priests to act them. Ordinary people began to dress up and play the stories. And the plays moved out of the churchyards and went into the village streets. The little new theater had been born.

FOLK PLAYING

When the theater came out of the church into the villages, it met the second grandparent of our theater, the songs and dances and games of the English folk.

"MERRIE ENGLAND"

In those days England was called "Merrie England." The people loved a joke and a game and a song and a dance. In the evening, when their work was over, the simple people—farmers, housewives, cobblers, shepherds, tinkers, tailors—would gather on the

village green. There they played games and danced and sang. The songs which they sang and the tunes to which they danced were not written in books. Young people had learned them from their elders. And the older people had learned them in turn from people who were older than they. For these songs were very, very old. And everything that the English people loved best had gone into the making of their verses and melodies.

Our own children still play games to these old tunes and songs. Haven't you played "The Slipper in the Ring"? Don't you know "Oats, Beans, Pease, and Barley Grow"? Can't you sing "The Farmer in the Dell," and "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush"? All these are old English folk games.

And our own people are now learning to sing the songs and dance the dances which used to be known to every English village. Cecil Sharp, an English musician, collected and wrote down the tunes and words of the songs and the tunes and steps of the dances,

so that they might not remain half or quite forgotten. People found that the tunes ran in their heads until they had to be sung. They found that their feet would dance almost of themselves to this gay music. So, all over England and America, more and more people are learning to dance and sing them again. In London, a thousand people or more gather often to spend an evening dancing folk dances in Hyde Park. Many American cities have a folk-dance festival every spring, where it is possible to see these old dances much as they were danced long ago, when the young theater came out of the churches into the English countryside.

There were three different kinds of dances which the English people loved to dance—the country dances, the morris dances, and the sword dances.

Everybody—men and women, young and old—used to dance the country dances. Each village had its favorites. There were hundreds of them. Some had such jolly names as

"Jenny Pluck Pears," "The Black Nag," "The Merry, Merry Milkmaids," "Gathering Peasecods," "The Tobacco Pipe Jig," "The Parson's Farewell," and "The Beginning of the World." And they are some of them very much like little plays.

The morris dances were harder to learn and harder to dance. It was the custom for these dances to be danced only by men. These morris dancers wore a special costume with little bells jingling at their knees. They carried a handkerchief in each hand, which they waved in a special way. They had special springing and jumping steps. With the dancers came Maid Marion and Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, Little John, and Tom the Piper, beloved figures of English legend. There were fat little hobby-horses and a fool. Every May Day these dancers would be found dancing round the Maypole. The very oldest people could not remember when this had not been the custom. And some of these morris

dances had words to be spoken. This made them, too, like short plays.

DANCING ROUND THE MAYPOLE

Perhaps even more difficult to learn and dance than the morris dances were the sword dances. These, too, were danced only by men. Each dancer carried a sword. In some

of the dances they pretended to fight or even to cut off a dancer's head. Some of the sword dances also had words to be spoken. Some of them were even called sword plays.

And some of the songs were like little plays. One of these songs, which is still sung by the country people in England, is sung in the mountains of Virginia by the descendants of English settlers. It is sung like a musical play, with acting. It is called "The Briery Bush." And it is acted in this way:

THE BRIERY BUSH

(*Two singers stand together. They are The Hangman and The Boy.*)

The Boy sings:

"O Hangman, stay thy hand, and stay it for a while,
For I fancy I see my father a-coming, across the yonder stile."

(*The Father comes and joins The Boy and The Hangman.*)

The Boy sings:

"O Father, have you my gold? and can you
set me free?
Or have you come to see me hung, all on the
gallows-tree?"

The Father sings:

"No, I've not brought thee gold, and I can't
set thee free,
But I have come to see thee hung, all on the
gallows-tree."

All sing:

"O the briery bush, that pricks my heart so
sore!
If I ever get out of the briery bush, I'll never
get in any more."

(*Then The Boy sees his mother come, and after her, his sister and his brother. He asks each one for the gold to set him free, but none of them can give it. At last he sees one more person coming.*)

The Boy sings:

"O Hangman, stay thy hand, and stay it for a while,
For I fancy I see my True Love a-coming, across the yonder stile!"

(*The True Love comes and stands by The Boy's side.*)

The Boy sings:

"True Love, have you brought me gold? and can you set me free?
Or have you come to see me hung, all on the gallows-tree?"

The True Love sings:

"Yes, I have brought thee gold, and I can set thee free,
And I've not come to see thee hung, all on the gallows-tree!"

All sing:

"O the briery bush, that pricks my heart so sore!
Now I've got out of the briery bush, I'll never get in any more!"

Doesn't that make a good play? There are many other songs of the English folk which are quite as much like plays as that one.

When the English villagers went to see the Mystery plays of the Church, they compared the Church plays with their own folk songs and dances and games. When the Mystery plays were like the folk dances and songs, the people were pleased. So, little by little, the plays which had come from the Church grew to be like the folk songs and dances. Jokes and dances and tunes from the folk playing crept into the Mysteries. The spirit of the folk playing grew into the young theater. And the folk playing became the second grandparent of our theater.

THE GUILDS

Gradually the priests entirely stopped acting in the Bible plays. They intrusted the duty to groups of people outside the Church.

These companies were working-people—carpenters, shipbuilders, masons, cobblers, goldsmiths, potters, tailors, merchants, sailors. Each trade had its own society or *guild*. Each of the guilds had its own play, which the members showed for the people every year.

At first the Guild plays were shown only once a year. Now that the plays had to be acted in the open, they were no longer done at Christmas or at Easter, for fear of bad weather. They were all acted in one great holiday performance on the day of Corpus Christi, which comes after the 1st of May and is likely to be warm and fine. After the guilds began to show the plays, they were no longer acted only in the churchyard. Each guild had its little stage. The stage was on wheels. It was drawn about from place to place. This platform on wheels was called a *pageant*. It had curtains hung about it, so that the actors might be concealed when they were not showing the play. The pag-

eants moved about the town in a procession on Corpus Christi Day. At all important places, like the inn and the market place, the carts stopped and the plays were shown.

Almost two hundred of these plays have been preserved for us to read. For the guilds kept them carefully written and put away. Each year the manuscript was brought out so that members could learn their parts. In different towns there were different sets of plays. Each set is called a *cycle* or circle. We have four cycles, each taking its name from the town where it was acted so long ago. There is the York Cycle, the Chester Cycle, the Wakefield Cycle, and the Coventry Cycle.

Just how or when it came about that plays were acted at other times during the year there is no way of knowing. It may be that some members of a guild, who liked acting their play better than they did shoemaking or building stone walls, went on acting the

THE CARTS STOPPED AND THE PLAYS WERE SHOWN

play when the holiday of Corpus Christi was over. Perhaps they showed it every week, until all the people in the town had seen it many times and there came a day when no one stopped to listen. Perhaps, after that, the actors decided to travel to a near-by village and show the play there. Perhaps they wandered on, getting farther and farther from home. Of course, they could no longer earn their living by their trade as they traveled. And so, when the play was over, one would pass the hat among the audience for pennies. It may be that this was the way in which it all began.

What we really know is that, by the year 1550, England had many strolling players. They wandered from village to village. They were ragged and poor. They acted on the village green or in the courtyard of the inn. They lived on what money they could pick up after their shows. And the simple people loved their plays.

SCHOOLBOY PLAYERS

Educated people, too, were thinking about plays. In colleges and in schools, plays were made to be acted by the boys. The masters and teachers made many of these plays. They did not take stories from the Bible. They made plays which taught a lesson or *moral*. These plays were called Morality Plays. They showed that being good and doing good was the only right way to live, while living for pleasure and self-indulgence was the wrong way. The greatest of these plays was called "Everyman." It is still acted in our theater today.

But these serious plays were not the only ones made for the schoolboy actors. There were funny little plays called *Interludes*, as well. The Interludes had almost no story. They showed people just as they were, making fun and laughing. The Interludes were like a little discussion you might hear on a street corner. The people were like the peo-

ple who might be seen in an English town of that day. The Interludes were more like our own plays than anything which had gone before.

SCHOOLBOYS PLAYED THESE PLAYS

The schoolboy actors played these plays so well that nobles at the court were interested. The boys were asked to bring their plays even before the king. And for a great many years there were companies of schoolboys who gave plays for the rich and powerful people at court. They showed their plays on a platform in a great banquet hall, or

out-of-doors at an evening party. And they must have acted very well, for long after there were real theaters in London the plays of these children continued to be acted.

It was for the boys at Christ's College, Cambridge, that the first real English comedy was written. This comedy is "Gammer Gurton's Needle." It shows a very funny story of what happened when old Gammer Gurton lost her precious needle, which was the only one in the village where she lived. The people in the story are like real people. And the story is a good story.

And at the same time that "Gammer Gurton's Needle" was written at Cambridge, another comedy was made by a master at the Westminster School. This was "Ralph Roister Doister." This play, too, is very funny. It was copied after a Latin play. And with these two plays, we meet the third grandparent of our theater, the rebirth of learning.

THE REBIRTH OF LEARNING

About 1500, Italy was the most exciting and fascinating place in the world. Young men went to visit Italy very much as we go to college now. For scholars in Italy had discovered that hundreds of years before their time there had been a beautiful world which people had forgotten. This was the classic, or ancient, world. The knowledge and science and wisdom and art of Rome and of Greece were brought to light and studied. Lost cities were dug up. Books by great authors, which had not been noticed for hundreds of years, were being read and studied as if for the first time. Statues of great beauty were found in rubbish heaps where they had been lying neglected for centuries. And the theaters of Rome and Greece were discovered. The Roman theaters became the model after which new theaters in Italy were built. The plays which had been acted in these Roman theaters gave a new pattern

for the making of plays in Italy, in France, and in England. All this study of ancient wisdom and beauty was called the *Italian Renaissance*, or the rebirth of learning.

THE THEATERS OF GREECE WERE DISCOVERED

When travelers brought back news of the rebirth of learning in Italy to their English homes, it became fashionable in England to copy everything Italian. The boys in the

schools acted Latin plays as well as the English ones which were made by their masters and the newest English plays were made like the old Latin plays.

During all these five hundred years there had been no theater buildings in England.

OLD LATIN PLAYS

Plays were acted in churches, plays were acted on church porches, plays were acted in the churchyards. Plays were put on little carts and wheeled about the towns. Players wandered about the countryside, showing their plays on village greens and in the courtyards of village inns. Plays were acted in halls by schoolboys and in the great halls of

the rich nobles at the court. But the theater had never had a building of its own, a home where it might entertain its audience! It was only after the rebirth of learning in

THE ROMAN THEATERS WERE COPIES OF THE GREEK THEATERS

Italy and the discovery of the Roman and Greek theaters that the first English theater was built in London.

Now the Roman theaters were copies of the Greek theaters which had been built long before the great days of Rome. The

Romans, who were splendid fighters and workers, had conquered Greece and had taken back to Rome the art and the fine ways of living which Greece had invented. Among these things was the Greek theater. And so, through the rebirth of learning, we find the fourth grandparent of our theater, the great theater of Greece.

THE GREEK THEATER

Now we must go back to three thousand years ago! For the theater of Greece began when the Greek life was simple and the Greek world was young.

In those early days in Greece the people did honor to their gods with songs and processions and dances, just as simple people always do. Every year at the feast of the god Dionysus, men and women marched, singing, to his altar. When they reached the altar, they moved about it, chanting praise of the god, and dancing. This group of men and women was called the *Chorus*.

All the rest of the people in the town gathered about the altar to take part in the praise by listening.

After a great many years—just when, we do not know—the leader of the Chorus made a slight change. He spoke to the Chorus. The Chorus listened to his words and answered with chanting. This made the ceremony more interesting. And after the leader of the Chorus had once begun to speak to them, it was not long before one man in the Chorus began to reply. Then the people who stood about listening heard a conversation between two people with songs chanted every now and then. The real Greek plays had begun.

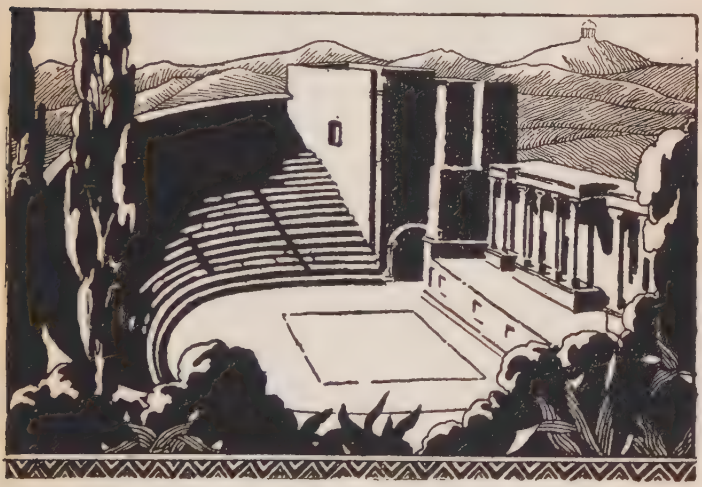
Year after year, the people went to stand about the altar of Dionysus at the time of his festival. They stood and listened to the chants and the talk between the two actors. The plays grew longer as time went on. People got tired of standing. So they sat down!

Greece is a hilly little country. The altar was put in a flat place, so that the Chorus might dance easily about it. But the land rose on all sides around it, and the people who watched and listened stood on the hillside. After a while wooden seats were built on the hillside. Each row was a little higher than the one nearer the altar, so that the people in back could look over the heads of those in front. This was the first theater in the world!

Long afterward, Greek theaters became much more magnificent and beautiful, but they were always built on the same plan. At the foot of the hillside was a flat space called the *orchestra*, or dancing place. Nearest to it were large chairs made of marble in a half-circle. These chairs were for the elders and important men of the town. Behind them rose the benches on which ordinary people could sit. These benches were in rows, and the rows made a half-circle about the orchestra, where the plays were acted.

Sometimes the seats were olive wood and sometimes they were marble.

At the back of the orchestra was a building with columns in front, like a Greek temple.



LATER GREEK THEATERS BECAME MORE MAGNIFICENT

In this building were the dressing-rooms, where the actors could wait until time for them to make their entrance. This building was called by the Greek word which means hut or tent—*skene* (skaynay). Our English word scene is the same word.

The theater of the Greeks looked more like a stadium for football games than like our theater. Because it was in the open air, and because the people at the back were so far away from the orchestra and stage, plays were acted very differently from the way in which ours are acted. The actors wore boots with thick soles—almost like little stilts—to make them look taller. They also had head-dresses which added to their height, and so that they might not look like bean poles, they had padding under their clothing. So that their faces might be seen a long way off, they wore false faces, or *masks*. These masks had open mouths which helped the voice of the actor to reach people far away. These masks were like tiny megaphones. Some had smiling faces and some were frowning. The people came to the theater in the morning and stayed all day. In sunshiny Greece there was no need to fear the weather.

The plays of the Greeks were noble and

beautiful. They were written by poets. To win the prize for the best play was the greatest honor. After theaters had been built in London, these plays were read and studied. They are still loved and studied today. But

MASKS

they have never been made as completely a part of our theater as the Greek theater building has become part of our English theater building.

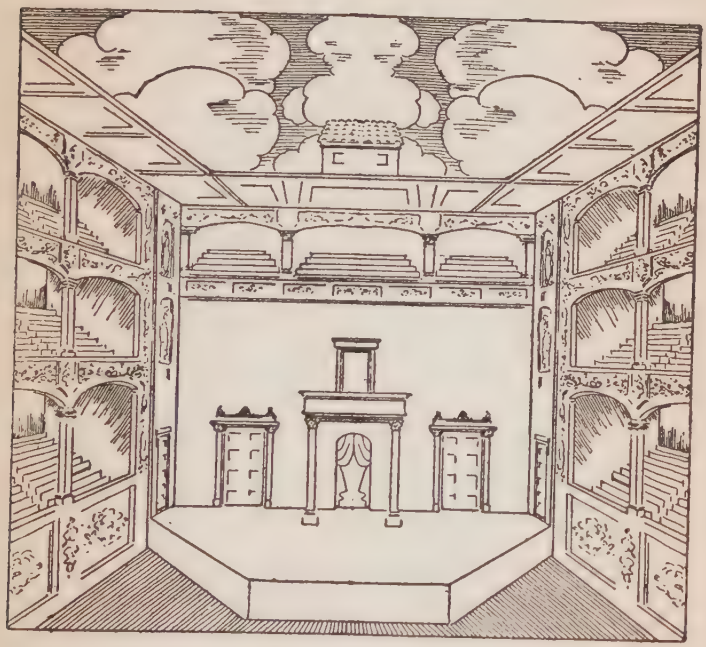
THE THEATER

The first theater for English plays was called "The Theater." It was built in London in 1576. In some ways it was like the courtyard of an inn, where plays had been acted until this time. In other ways it was like the Roman and Greek theaters. The build-

ing was a square with the corners rounded. At one end was a platform which was the stage, where plays were shown. Round the other three walls, galleries were built. The galleries had a roof, but the middle of the room was uncovered. Poor people who could pay very little, stood near the platform on the ground. They were called the "Groundlings." If it rained they got wet, and even the people in the galleries were likely to be cold and damp.

The stage was like the platform on which plays had been shown in the courtyards of the inns. It had a wall at the back, with a door in the middle and one on each side. Later, there were as many as five doors. At the back of the platform, in the center, was a porch with a door above it. This made a balcony. Actors could come out on it and look down at the stage below. When part of the play took place upstairs in a house, this balcony was very convenient. Under the porch it was possible to show scenes

which were supposed to be in a small room in a house. The big stage was used for out-of-door places, and for banquets or large gatherings.



THE STAGE WAS LIKE A PLATFORM

The stage had no curtain. It could never be hidden from the audience. When a new scene began in a new place, pages used to

bring out a sign which told what the place was to be: A Garden, The Street, or, A Room in the Palace of the King.

This new theater had very little light. Torches burned on the stage, but often the faces of the actors could hardly be seen. But no one minded. To have any theater was such a wonderful thing!

WILL SHAKESPEARE AND QUEEN BESS

These first theaters were built during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. It was a great time in the history of England. It was a great time in the history of the theater. Great poets began to write plays. Everybody went to hear them.

Will Shakespeare was the greatest of all the Elizabethan poets. His plays have been acted ever since the time of Queen Bess. When he was a boy in Stratford, he must have seen plays acted by strolling players in the courtyard of the inn. When he was

still very young, he went up to London. It is said that he began his life there by holding the horses for gentlemen who came to the performances at the theater. Soon he was acting there, and not long after, he was

WILL SHAKESPEARE

writing the plays which were acted in the theater and before the queen.

The great day of the English theater had come at last! The four grandparents had each contributed to this greatness. The

Church had begun the making of plays. The folk songs and dances had given the sadness and the gayety which was truly of the English people. The rebirth of learning had taught the way to make better plays. The Greek theater had pointed the way to build a home for the plays when they were ready to be acted. And now, in the time of Queen Bess, all the richness and greatness and beauty of a young and vigorous England poured into the theater which had been made ready to receive it.

THE CLOSING OF THE THEATERS

After the death of Queen Elizabeth there was a time when the public theaters were closed. Plays could only be done in private houses. For almost twenty years, the people could not see plays and only a few were written. The plays were printed and read. But the day of the great poets in the theater was past.

THE CURTAIN

The plays which were done in the homes of rich and powerful nobles were often beautiful. Some of them were put on the stage at great expense, with much display of costly furniture and costumes. The way in which the play was shown became very important in these plays. Soon after the time of Will Shakespeare, an artist and architect, Inigo Jones, became much interested in building the stages and making machinery for showing these private plays. Inigo Jones had traveled in France and in Italy. He had studied the art of Greece and Rome and knew the work of great artists in Italy. He made splendid pictures for his stages. Many of his drawings remain for us to see, and although we can not tell just how these pictures looked when they were actually on the stage, we can see what care he took and how much he tried to make a beautiful and life-like setting. For one of these magnificent

plays, Inigo Jones built a frame in front of his picture. And behind it he hung a curtain which could be drawn between the audience

INIGO JONES BUILT A FRAME

and the stage. This is the first time of which we know certainly that the curtain was used. And the curtain has made many changes in the way in which plays are shown.

SCENERY

After the curtain became a real part of the theater, and after the public theaters had been opened again and had come to use a curtain, stage decoration by the use of *scenery* was begun. Gardens and houses and ballrooms and streets were pictured on the stage. The earliest scenery was a flat picture. It looked very much as if a drawing had been cut from a picture book. The actors stood on the stage in front of this picture. Most theaters had only four or five different pictures, and all plays were made to fit them.

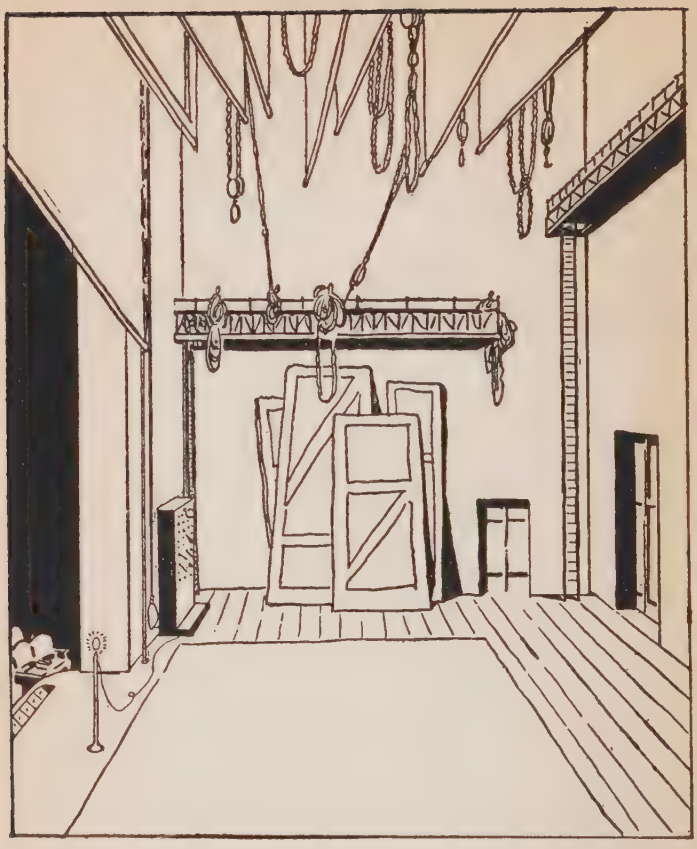
It was a hundred years after the death of Will Shakespeare before scenery in the least like what we know came into use. At first this scenery was made on a very simple plan. It was still only painted, flat scenery. (Our grandmothers and grandfathers remember this kind of scenery.) At the back of the stage was a painted curtain. It was

called the *back-drop* or *back-cloth.* It was on a roller like a large window shade. It could be rolled up and down in a few moments, so that, when the scene was to be changed, a new roller could quickly take the place of the old one. And at the sides of the stage, so that the people could not see the places where the actors were waiting, there were painted *wings.* These wings were made of canvas, stretched on a light frame. Each back-drop had a set of wings to match it. If the back-drop showed a country scene, the wings would be painted trees. If the back-drop were a street in a town, the wings might be corners of houses. They took their name from the way in which they were set up. They were at the sides of the stage, one behind the other, with about four or five feet between them. They were not on a line with the front and back of the stage, but at an angle: those at the back of the stage were a little nearer the middle of the

stage than those at the front. They looked like the wings of some insect or the fins of a fish. And they cut off all but that part of the stage which was straight in front of the curtain.

OUR STAGE

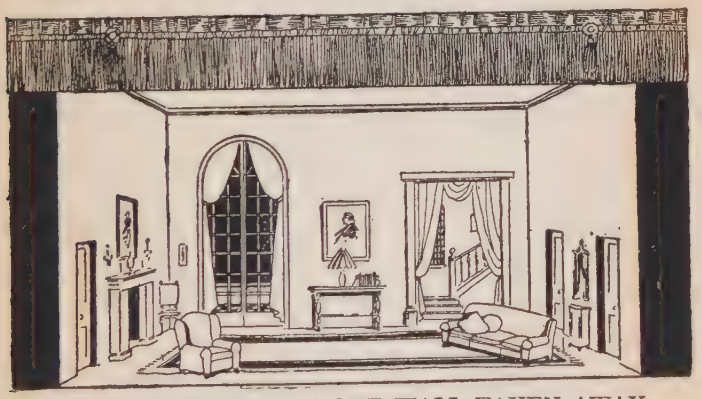
For our stage is very different from the stage of the Greeks or the stage of Will Shakespeare's theater. The part of the stage where the play takes place is a very small part of the whole stage. The whole stage is about five times as big as what the audience can see. When you look at it empty, it looks like a great barn. It is two stories high. It has pulleys and wires and ropes for moving scenery. It has a balcony part way up on the wall, for men who handle the heavy pieces of scenery. And in the middle is a square of about fifty feet, where the play is shown. For the *setting* of the play, the way in which the play is shown, has become a very important part of our theater.



THE STAGE LOOKS LIKE A GREAT BARN

THE BOX SET

The first improvement in scenery was in showing a room in a house. Before the invention of electric light, rooms were made with a back-drop and wings, just as out-of-



LIKE A ROOM WITH ONE WALL TAKEN AWAY

door scenes were made. For before electric light was used, all the light on the stage had to come from gas lamps hung high above the stage. But with electric light, which could be used by careful wiring in any part of the stage, there came a new kind of room for the theater. Instead of wings, it had three

walls. And across the top of these walls, a ceiling was carefully lowered. It looked exactly like a room with one wall taken away.

These new rooms were called *box sets*. Twenty-five years ago they were extravagantly admired in our theater. The windows opened and shut like real windows. The doors could be closed with a loud bang. The fire on the hearth was so glowing that no one could dream there was not a chimney up on the roof. And everything in the rooms was equally real. There were pictures hanging on the walls, flowers in vases, books on shelves, costly rugs on the floors. The electric lights could be turned on from a switch in the wall. When the doors opened, there was another room beyond. It was a house which looked as if you might live in it.

But really it was not all solid. The walls were made of canvas, stretched on light wooden frames. The edges of these frames were fitted together and clamped to the floor of the stage with iron braces. The ceiling,

too, was of canvas. It was light and easy to handle. When the walls had been set up, the ceiling was lowered from high overhead on pulleys. So the walls could be taken down quickly and the scene changed in a short time.

Our theater still uses these box sets for rooms in houses. We no longer think much about them. We expect a room to look like a room.

But electric light has also made possible many changes in the way out-of-door scenes can be shown in our theater. Twenty-five years ago, the sky was a piece of painted canvas. Sometimes it would get askew and there would be great wrinkles in the sky! Now, a large number of our theaters have a *cyclorama* or *sky-dome*. This is a plaster wall, built at the back of the stage. It is very rough plaster. Sometimes it is white, sometimes it is blue, and sometimes it is white mottled with blue like the sky. From above, from below, and from the sides, bright

lamps are directed toward this plaster surface. The roughness of the plaster catches and breaks up the light. The glow reflects toward the audience, just as the real sky reflects the light of the sun. The color of the plaster can be changed by changing the color of the lights; the sky can be blue or white or green or violet. When we see it from the audience it looks like a bit of the real sky.

It is the astonishing things which can be done with electric light which are making our theater change and grow. Artists have come to work in the theater—not only actors and poets and musicians, but painters and architects. They are constantly inventing new ways and better ways of showing scenes. Sometimes no paint is used on the scenery; all color is put into the scene by the use of colored lights. Sometimes one scene is made to represent a great many different places, only by changing the lighting. Sometimes only one corner of the stage is shown at a time, and the changes of scene are made by

turning off a light in one corner and turning on another light in another corner. We are only beginning to imagine what magic can be made with electricity in the theater.

ELECTRIC LIGHT MAKES OUR SCENERY CHANGE AND GROW

GETTING THE PLAY READY TO SHOW

When a play is to be acted, there is much to be done in our theater. The play will need the help of many people before it will be ready to show to an audience.

First of all, the play goes to the *director*. The director is like the leader of a band or

orchestra. He leads and directs all the other people who work in the theater. The director studies the play carefully. He must think out a way in which everything written in the play can be done in the theater. For a play is only a plan of what is to be pretended on the stage. Did you ever see an architect's drawing of a house? It looks very little like a real house, when it is built. A play is like that drawing. It is a skeleton of what we shall see when we go to the theater. The director must study it all until he is sure just how each thing can be done. And then, when he feels sure he knows what the author meant by every word, he consults his helpers.

The director has an artist or *designer* to help him make the stage into beautiful pictures. He has *stage carpenters* to build the scenery after the artist has drawn the designs. He has an *electrician* to make the lighting of the scenes. He has a *costumer* who will make the dresses people are to wear. He has a *musician* to advise him, if there be music

in the play. He has a *property man* who takes care of all the little things and makes sure that they are in their proper places. He has *scene-shifters* who change the scenery. He has *actors* who will take part in the story. He has a *prompter* who will sit out of sight while the play is going on, reading from the play just what everybody says and does. If anyone forgets what to do or say, the prompter can whisper to him. He has a *stage manager* who will see that everything is in proper place each night that the play is given. Artists, musicians, costumer, carpenters, electricians, scene-shifters, property men, prompter, and actors—they are a little army. And the director must make the work of each one fit with the work of the others.

When a play is being acted in the theater, no one can waste a moment. The longest plays rarely last over three hours. Most plays take about two hours and a half. That is a very short time to show a person's

whole life, as some plays do! So everything must be made to help tell the story. The scenery, the lights, the costumes, must all

THE ARTIST TRIES TO MAKE THE STAGE BEAUTIFUL, FIRST OF ALL

do a part. So everyone who works in the theater must know how to make his work fit the showing of a play.

The artist makes his picture tell something about the people in the story. He tries to make the stage beautiful first of all. Then

he makes his scene so that when the audience sees it, they will feel as if they were really in the place he is showing. He makes a big room with fine furnishings to show that the people are rich. If the sun comes streaming through the wide windows and there are flowers in vases, the audience will think at once that the people who live in that house are happy. If the shades are drawn and there is no fire burning in the fireplace, no flowers, no sewing, no books on the table, the audience will decide that the people are not happy or that they have gone away. If there is a rocking-horse in the corner, or a doll dropped in a chair, it will show that there is a child in the house.

Or, the artist makes a tiny room. The wall paper is torn and soiled. There are streaks on the walls where rain has beaten through a broken windowpane. Rags have been stuffed in the hole where glass should be. The floor is bare and there is almost no furniture. The poor little cot bed, with one

blanket folded on the mattress, the broken chairs and plain worn-out table, will tell us at once that the people who live there are poor. If the room is neat, with mended clean curtains at the window, the audience will know that these people try to do the best they can. If it is a dirty room, ragged and uncared for everywhere, there will be no need to explain what careless, wretched people live in it. Much can be told by the artist's picture when the stage is first seen.

When the picture designed by the artist has been built for the stage by the stage carpenter, it is the electrician's turn. The artist will plan just how the light should look at each moment during the play. Perhaps he makes a room with morning sunlight coming in the window, perhaps he makes a garden shimmering in the moonlight, perhaps he makes a ballroom with hundreds of tiny candles to give it light, perhaps he makes a nursery with a shaded lamp so low that it is hard to see the children sleeping in their

beds. The electrician will know just which lights to use for each.

The electrician makes a little map of the stage, marked to show where the lights are to be put. He runs a wire to each one and sets up his light there. When this is done he can do all his work from the switchboard. He can make the lights grow brighter or more dim, or even fade away to nothing. He can change black night to a warm gray, to the red glow of dawn and the bright, clear light of morning. He can put out a hundred candles one by one. All this he can do without moving from his switchboard at one side of the stage, out of sight. He will play on the switchboard as an organist plays on an organ, flooding the stage with light, as the organ floods the air with sound.

While all these preparations are being made, the director will choose the people who are to act the author's story. Costumes will be made to fit the actors, and the costumes will help in the telling of the story.

In plays of long ago, the costumes tell when it all happened. A play of George Washington's time will have knee breeches, shoe buckles, lovely flowered dresses, and powdered wigs. A play of Julius Cæsar's time will have togas such as the Romans wore. A play about Chinese people must have beautiful, flowing, embroidered robes. And the costumes will be carefully planned to fit into the pictures of the artist.

The actors are people who spend their lives in pretending to be the people in plays. They have to study how to speak and how to move. They must know how to speak distinctly and clearly without shouting. They must know how to walk gracefully, how to hobble awkwardly, how to fall down stairs or faint away in a little heap. Some great actors even seem able to change their very faces. They come on the stage looking like the person in the story.

Once I saw an Irish actress in three short plays on the same day. In the first play

she was an old woman. Her voice was high and thin. It was so faint that I kept wondering whether I could really hear it, but every word was as clear as ringing silver. Her eyes were quiet and dull and looked almost asleep. When she moved across the stage, she seemed too tired to get to the door. But in the next play the same actress was a young girl. Her eyes were wide open and very bright. Her voice was soft and singing. She was a sad young girl, but every now and then she smiled and showed a dimple. When she moved, her step had a little spring in it. She was as young as she had been old in the first play. And then she came again. Now she was a jolly fat woman, neither young nor old. She waddled like a duck when she walked. She talked all the time in a loud cackling voice like a hen calling her chicks. Her eyes seemed to have slipped back into her head, where they shone like black buttons. I found it hard to believe that one woman could change so much!

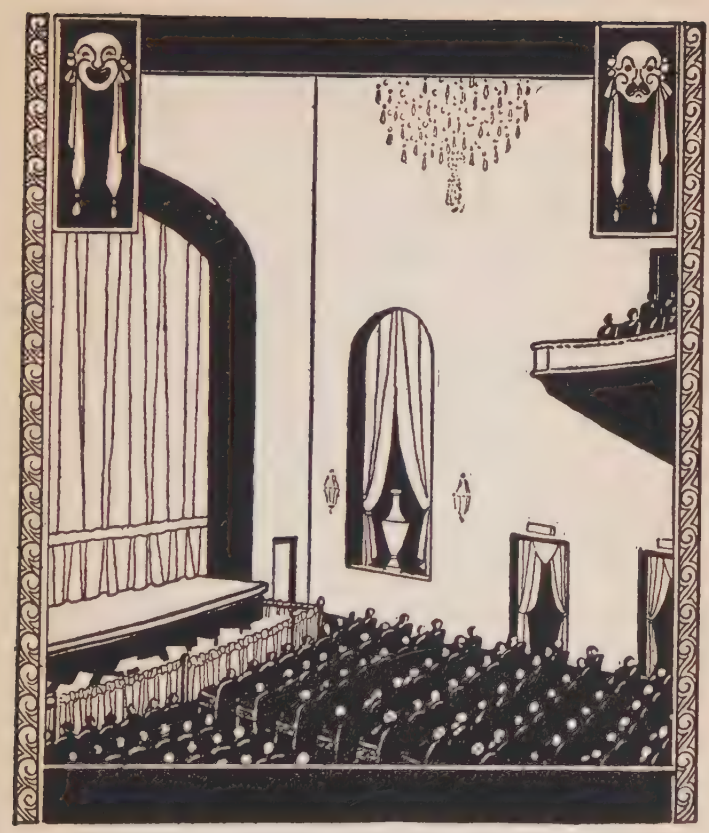
Every day the director calls the actors to the theater. On the empty stage they study the play. They learn all that they are to do and say. They must know what they are thinking, even when they have no words to speak. Each word must be spoken in exactly the right way. This takes weeks of practicing.

And then, one day, everything is ready!

On the night of the play we come into the theater. Outside all is bright and gay. We buy a ticket at the box-office, we pass through the marble hall and into the auditorium, where several hundred people can be seated. We are shown to our seats. We sit facing a great opening which is closed by a curtain.

The lights in the auditorium fade. The curtain glows with light for a moment and then slips out of sight. In its place appears a picture in which people move about and speak. A story is told before our eyes.

The story is like a dream. It passes as smoothly as the ticking of a clock. We, who are the audience, sit like mice, and know what



WE COME INTO THE THEATER

the people do, and think, and feel. We live their lives for a little while. We, too, are a part of their story.

We no longer remember the little army of people who are hidden away on the stage to make the telling of the story perfect. We forget the electrician at his switchboard, the prompter with his book, the stage manager who watches over everything, the property man who keeps the tiny things in order. We no longer remember that these people are actors whose business it is to pretend. We never think of the weeks of rehearsing while they learned their parts in the story. We have no memory of the artist who designed the pictures, the stage carpenters who built them or the costumer who made the dresses. We cannot see the stage hands, moving swiftly behind the scenes to change the pictures. And we have quite forgotten the director who planned everything!

For it is the secret of the theater to make us forget everything but what is happening

in the square of light that is the stage. It is like magic. It *is* magic. And it is a magic which has slowly grown more wonderful through all the length of a thousand years.

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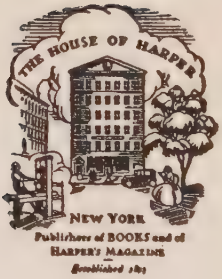
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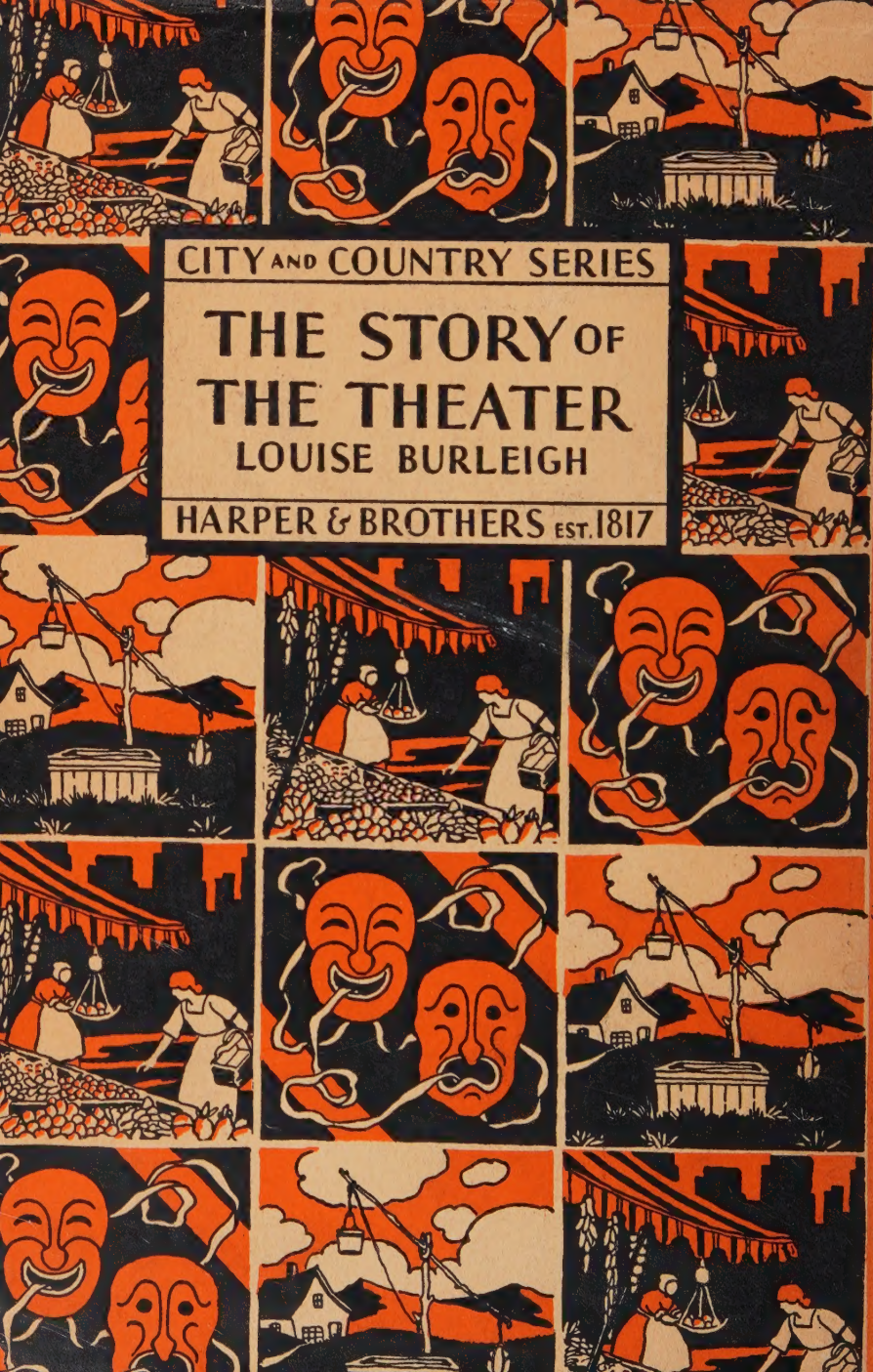
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